

New Jersey's Special Review Assessment: Loophole or Lifeline?

By Mary Bennett, Michelle Fine, & Stan Karp

Last year, some 13,500 students received their high school diplomas through New Jersey's Special Review Assessment (SRA), the state's alternative graduation test.

More than 5,000 were in the urban "Abbott" districts. Nearly 1,000 were in Newark alone. Another 8,000 were scattered throughout the state.

Ordinarily, one might expect an alternative education program that encourages students to stay in school, remain on track to graduate, and continue their education after high school would have broad support. But the SRA has been the subject of contentious public debate. Detractors have called it a "backdoor diploma" that "hurts the very students it seeks to help." Supporters argue that the SRA is a much-needed alternative to the state's traditional test, the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA), and has even "saved lives" by keeping students from dropping out of school with its well-documented negative personal and social consequences.

This fall thousands of students and their teachers returned to school uncertain if the SRA will survive beyond this year. A new study, *New Jersey's Special Review Assessment: Loophole or Lifeline?* conducted by the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, New Jersey's Education Law Center, the Institute on Education Law and Policy at Rutgers, Newark and Newark's Project GRAD, explains why it should.

Despite its reputation as a "free path to a diploma," SRA graduates are students who have stayed in school, passed their courses, and met all the local requirements for graduation. If they don't pass all three parts of the HSPA, they must complete a series of "performance assessment tasks" that cover the same subject matter and are of comparable difficulty to HSPA test questions, though they are given in un-timed, less formal settings. Linda Darling-Hammond of Stanford University and Executive Director of the National Commission for Teaching and America's Future has called the SRA "an example of high-quality performance assessment and...one reason why New Jersey has both very high achievement levels and very strong graduation rates."

If the SRA is eliminated, the new study concludes, many SRA students will become dropouts. English Language Learners, immigrants, and urban students of color will see the most concentrated impact. But the effects will be felt statewide, especially in math, where major challenges and teacher shortages exist, and among English-language learners who can now take the SRA in multiple languages while the HSPA is given only in English.

NJ's nationally leading graduation rate will decline. Graduation rates for African American and Hispanic students, now among the best in the country, will fall; in some places dramatically.

No one wants this to happen, but it is a predictable result based on New Jersey research and on relevant national experience with high stakes graduation exit tests. We urgently need to avoid this outcome. Is there anyone who really thinks it is good public policy to create thousands of dropouts in the name of education reform?

There is an alternative. Fix the SRA, instead of eliminating it. And get serious about secondary reform.

The SRA's credibility as an assessment tool has been undermined by inconsistent scoring, lax administration and a lack of external review. These issues could be addressed by moving the scoring

process away from schools and districts evaluating their own students to regional teams of trained NJ educators scoring SRA on a blind basis. Administration of the SRA could also be made more consistent across districts.

But simply eliminating the SRA will not raise achievement levels or improve schools. If students are not well prepared after 12 years, that's what we need to address, not just the tests. This means tackling deeply-rooted problems of school climate and safety, tying education more closely to the real world students are about to enter, and dealing honestly with the deep alienation young people face in large, anonymous high schools. It requires changes in the ways schools actually function: smaller learning environments, collaborative teams of teachers working with students over multiple years; time and preparation for better professional practice, and better relations and communication with parents and families.

Changes in graduation standards and assessment systems should support such changes, not substitute for them. We should be expanding multiple pathways to high school graduation, not eliminating them, and adopting policies that actually reduce educational failure instead of imposing new penalties on the victims of it.

We also need better information about what it means to prepare students for the world that awaits them. Despite much talk of "data driven reform," there are no studies that show that the HSPA is a more reliable predictor of success than the SRA. The new report calls on the New Jersey Department of Education to conduct a post graduation follow up study to determine the comparative college and employment outcomes for dropouts, HSPA and SRA graduates. We already have ample research that documents a predictable rise in dropout rates when states implement a single, high stakes graduation exit examination and that tracks the high costs of leaving school without a diploma in lower earnings, shorter life expectancy and higher crime rates.

In his state of the state address last January, Governor Corzine declared, "We have the highest high school graduation rates in the nation... Whatever we do, we must keep and enhance the nation's best school system." Improving, rather than eliminating, the SRA would be a small step in the right direction. Supporting higher standards by providing higher levels of support for the students, families, teachers and schools expected to reach them would be a bigger one.

September 5, 2007

Mary G. Bennett, is Executive Director of Project GRAD in Newark, NJ.

Dr. Michelle Fine is Distinguished Professor of Psychology at the Graduate Center of the City University of NY.

Stan Karp is Director of the Secondary Reform Project for NJ's Education Law Center.

The complete report, *New Jersey's Special Review Assessment: Loophole or Lifeline?* is available at:

http://www.edlawcenter.org/ELCPublic/elcnews_080822_SRAPressRelease.htm